

it's hard to be brave when you're alone in the dark by ceedawkes

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Summary:

after the gate is closed, the splintered remains of a family come back together to make a whole || eleven and mike come to visit will and joyce. hopper is there too. primarily eleven-and-will centric.

it's hard to be brave when you're alone in the dark

Author's Note:

be the family fic you wish to see in the world!
outline those parallels between eleven and will! let
them bond because they're so similar! get outta here
jealousy because mike loves them both! let hopper
and joyce co-parent!

could be eleven/mike/will if you squint??? they're
babies still, though, so it's mostly just straight-up
fluffy content and comfort cuddling. jopper is here
too.

“Where’s Will?”

Joyce doesn’t even have the door open all the way when she’s asked this, her mouth open in a greeting that dies before it’s voiced. She’s not sure what strange sixth sense Mike Wheeler seems to have regarding her youngest -- maybe he reads anxiety in the shadows under her eyes, worry in the tangles of her hair -- but somehow he always knows when something’s up with Will. It was cute when they were littler, when that mop of dark hair would suddenly jerk up from intense sandbox-playing, like a forest critter sensing danger, turning one way, then the other, then making a beeline to wherever Will was, sitting and getting his scraped knees bandaged or a bee sting removed or something.

Now it just makes Joyce’s chest ache. Mike’s gotten taller in the last year, his shoulders broadening, his voice deepening, and he looks much too old. The worry on his face is too adult, the fear about something much more serious than playground injuries. None of them -- the adults, the teenagers, the kids -- are the same as they were before that November day last year, but it’s the hardest to see on a boy Joyce loves like her own.

So she steps out, closing the door behind her to keep out the draft (sort of a futile attempt, since there’s a piece of plastic still stretched over the front window, rattling in the late December wind) and

manages a reassuring smile for the kids. For the first time she notices that it's not just Mike -- behind him, a little to the left, is a quiet, warmly-dressed figure, riotous dark curls peeking out from under a borrowed beanie, watching Joyce from behind dark sunglasses. That explains at least part of Mike's intensity. The boy's protectiveness is twofold, focused most intently on Will and on the girl standing at his side.

"He's fine, honey, he's just..." Joyce trails off, arms crossing over her chest as she tries to find the right words. It isn't a fever, it's not a stomachache or a cold or anything that she can pinpoint and try to solve. Will's just off today. There's no one particular reason she can point to -- no episodes, no screaming nightmares, no insensitive words that triggered some sort of flashback. Some days her boy wakes up and he's just not himself. By now Joyce can recognize this, can catch the emptiness in those big eyes, the sluggishness in Will's movements. She's still learning what to offer at those times. Will doesn't want to talk, he doesn't want to leave the house, and Joyce doesn't know how far to push him.

Still, she hasn't yet tried bringing his friends over. Not all of them, because she's not insane, she doesn't want to wreck the house a third time, but Mike and -- Jane, El, Eleven, the girl still looking just at Joyce, her gaze so direct even behind the sunglasses. They're likely some attempt at a disguise, even though the path from the cabin to the Byers' house is almost entirely through the woods.

Joyce breathes in, out, pushing back the crawling fear that makes her want to go back inside, curl herself tiny and ferocious around Will and keep him safe. She can't. She knows all too well that she can't. He's been to places she can't ever understand, suffered things that make her sob into her pillow at night to think of. The best she can do is surround him with safe things, safe people. Mike and Eleven count as safe people. So she smiles, gently pushing open the door.

"He's not feeling too well today, but...I think seeing you two might help." Mike meets her eyes with a strange understanding, nodding and stepping out of his shoes so he won't track mud into the house. Eleven follows suit, slips off the sunglasses and folds them with slow, careful gestures, like she's doing everything for the first time.

Joyce can't stop herself from reaching out, tucking the girl's hair into place where it's mussed from her hat. "It's good to see you, sweetheart," she says, chest tight with tenderness at how Eleven leans into the touch. Joyce has always been affectionate with her boys, with their friends, petting hair and touching shoulders and hugging, and her breath catches at the raw hunger in this little girl's face. Eleven is starving for contact of any kind, rising to the Joyce's hand like a kitten and reaching out shamelessly to catch Mike's hand in her own, not seeming to notice how he blushes.

"Will?" she prompts in that soft, raspy voice, bright eyes flicking to the couch, then to the backdoor. Of course, the only times she's seen him, he was either on the couch or in the shed. Or the Upside Down.

A wave of nausea makes Joyce's hands tremble, and she wraps her arms back around herself. "He's in his room. Down the hall, on the left."

Eleven nods, tugging gently at Mike's hand, prompting. And he goes, of course he goes, like there's a magnet in his chest that's attuned to her. Joyce remembers the first heady rush of puppy love, remembers even her first high school crush. But it's something different between these two. They move in sync, they talk without talking, they know where each other are at all times, like two halves of the same whole. Joyce is stunned to find that she *envies* that.

As if reading her mind, Eleven pauses, looking up at Joyce with that unflinching directness. "Four-three-oh," she says, a tiny smile quirking on her lips. "Hopper."

--Hop's going to pick you up at four-thirty?" Joyce attempts to translate, the nickname slipping in without her conscious consent. The tiny smile grows deeper, and even Mike grins, amusement breaking through his worry. Joyce clears her throat, waves them towards the hallway. "Okay, I'll let you know when he's here. Go on."

She watches them go, fighting the inexplicable urge to change her clothes, do something with her hair before Hopper comes. It's just Jim. It's just Hop.

Will is smaller than Mike. That's one of the things 011

(she has to pause, shake her head slightly, adjust her mind, because she is not 011, she is Eleven, she is sometimes Jane (Ives and Hopper), she is always El, but she is never 011 again)

has always noticed about him. He's curled up under the covers so small and tight, like a sliver of moon, like the kittens in Lucas's basement, like something she wants to sit close to and protect. He doesn't move when the door opens, blankets pulled up to the top of his head, where his hair is soft and perfectly straight and silky, not like anyone else's. Lucas's hair is short and tight circles, Dustin's is like a cloud of dusty froth, Max's is long and tangled and shimmering and Mike's is thick and waving. Eleven's is dark and it curls, halfway between Mike's and Max's, but Will's is straight.

She wants to touch it. She knows better -- Lucas had given her a very serious talk about that -- but she still wants to. She can see the barrier between Will and the rest of the world like it's a physical thing, fragile and carefully constructed. A house of cards, like the one Hopper had made for her. He is quiet and he is good at hiding, and his protection is so, so easily destroyed. Eleven knows he knows this, but he builds it up again and again anyway.

Mike doesn't see it, or perhaps he doesn't care, crossing the room with wide, careless strides. Everything in the world moves out of Mike's way, or he'll move it himself. He's not like Eleven, who waits and considers and learns the shape of other humans, the jagged edges of what is and isn't allowed. It occurs to her that Will is like her this way.

"Hey, Will, it's us," Mike is saying, and the lump under the blankets twitches, moves, uncurls into Will Byers, frowning and pale and so, so thin. The shadows of exhaustion match his mother's, but there are monsters lurking in his big eyes that only Eleven can recognize. Out of all the people she's met -- and there are only a few, few enough that she can count them and not run out of numbers -- it is this boy she's barely spoken to who she is most like.

That is a good thing, Eleven decides. Will is quiet, he is gentle, he is unsure and afraid and guarded, just like her, but he is also so loved.

Also, he is Mike's and Mike is hers in a way that makes a perfect, quiet sense to Eleven, though the one time she'd mentioned it in out-loud words, it hadn't made nearly as much sense to Mike. Sometimes people belong to one another, not the way she had belonged to Papa, or the way Mike belonged to his parents, in a way that wasn't a choice, that wasn't good and safe. Sometimes people fit into each other like jigsaw puzzle pieces, and seeing them together is good.

Like now, even though Will is frowning and confused and his hair is sticking up like Mike's does, and he's hunching under his blankets like he has something to hide. He doesn't understand why they're there, but he doesn't want them out. He turns towards Mike as he sits on the edge of the bed, he even turns to Eleven as she does likewise. "What are...you guys doing here?" he manages finally, looking between Eleven and Mike.

"Visiting mission," Eleven replies, hands folded in her lap. She sits very still, all her energy contained, her fingers laced together, her body at rest. She knows it marks her as different, especially when she's surrounded by youthful, kinetic energy, bursting out in all directions. But she also knows that her quiet won't scare Will. It's too like his own.

Mike nods emphatically, already shifting, knee bumping against Will's under the blankets, weight resting on one hand, braced on the bed, then the other. Mike never stops moving, not for a moment, and Eleven is quietly amused that someone so busy can have his whole world contained in two people who are so still.

It reminds her, and she reaches out, slow and careful, preparing herself for the flinch that may come. It won't offend her; she understands. Mike is speaking, brow knit in concern, "'We were worried about you. Your mom said you weren't feeling well,'" and Eleven can feel Will starting to protest. He's very good at that. He can promise he's okay, that nothing is wrong, even when there are dark things clinging to him, dragging from his fingertips, crowded into his eyes. He may even convince some people.

But not them. Eleven's hand crosses the short distance just as Will opens his mouth, her fingers steal over his, feeling the roughness on his fingertips, on the side of his third finger, from holding a pencil, a

crayon, a marker. She likes that, it's something that's just him. She slips her hand into his and holds tight, the way she did in the Upside-Down, the way she did when he slept and the Mind Flayer raged inside him. She hopes he remembers.

He does. Will does not pull away, he does not curl in on himself and continue to lie. Friends don't lie, but Will does, Will never stops lying. Eleven can't imagine how tired it must make him. He must be hungry to stop, hungry in a cold, all-consuming way, the way she was in the forest, the way she was while hiding. Hiding is hungry work.

Will looks down at her hand in his, at the lace of fingers, almost the same size, because Eleven is small like him, Eleven is scared and hiding and different, but she is here. Will looks up and Eleven is smiling gently.

"I'm not," he says, so small, so hoarse, and Eleven can see the barriers, the protection crumbling and wavering. He doesn't want it to, he struggles against it, and so she gives him a way out. Still holding his hand, Eleven shifts until she's sitting next to him, feet stretched out, socked toes nudging against Mike's leg.

"Mike," she says, and loves him even more when he understands. Mike squirms over until he's cross-legged on the end of the bed, facing the two of them, and even though his forehead is still wrinkled with concern, it fades a little when he starts talking. It doesn't matter what he's talking about -- the campaign, it seems, talking about ideas he has, about how it's been integrating Max into the party. Will is nestled down into the covers, his hand is warm and tight on Eleven's and he's watching Mike like he's the only light in a storm.

Eleven understands that look. It's the one she always has when she looks at Mike. She squeezes Will's hand a little tighter, glad that this too, they have in common.

~

When Hopper's dirty brown truck rolls up in front of the Byers house, Joyce is on the front step with a cigarette between her fingers, alternating the smoky breaths with breaths of icy December air. It's not snowy, just cold, and Hopper's breath creates puffs of steam as he

walks up the front steps.

“Hey. Where’re the munchkins?” He has the same sort of vigilance that Mike does, the same protectiveness in a bigger, older package, and the thought makes Joyce smile.

She takes a slow, careful drag on the cigarette, exhales. “In Will’s room. Last time I checked, Mike was retelling the plot of some movie. Sound effects and all.” She’s smiling, a real smile, not the forced, shaky one she wears at work or in front of her kids. Hopper knows the difference by now.

He settles next to her, leaning on the banister, and she hands over the cigarette without pause. It’s a familiar dance between them by now, the warmth of his arm pressed to hers, the taste of her on the cigarette when he breathes in. “Will was...he looked better,” Joyce says, like a confession. Her son had been under the covers next to Eleven, who’d apparently gotten in at some point -- the broken window makes the whole house cold. He’d looked just as tired, just as lost, but there was brightness in his eyes and his head was resting on Eleven’s shoulder. And he was smiling.

At this point, that smile is the only thing Joyce prays for anymore.

Hopper grunts softly, glancing back towards the house, then handing the cigarette back to Joyce. “Good. Glad they...y’know. Get along.”

It’s a loaded comment, one that makes Joyce’s eyebrows quirk in amusement. She’d had her worries -- the best friend and the crush meeting for the first time, actually spending time together, actually interacting without the threat of the apocalypse hanging over them. It could’ve been awkward, could’ve been uncomfortable, could’ve driven a wedge between Will and Mike.

But it hadn’t. Joyce had seen that the second she peeked in through the crack in the door. There was a quiet camaraderie between Will and Eleven that she had never seen with him and anyone else. An understanding, almost. She’s relieved, because of how much Will depends on his friends, on Mike especially. She’s relieved, because she cares about this strange, unique, magnificently special little girl.

She's relieved, because she wants Hopper to stay right where he is, standing beside her on the front porch, watching the early winter sunset, sharing cigarettes, her watchful, protective fellow guardian against the monsters that haunt their children. And, feeling his arm lift and settle over her shoulders, warm and solid and safe, Joyce has the feeling that he and his daughter are going to be spending a lot of time with her and her family.